NCAA Division I Collegiate Athletes’ Motivational Perspectives Pertaining to their Academic and Athletic Roles

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NCAA Division I Collegiate Athletes’ Motivational Perspectives Pertaining to their Academic and Athletic Roles

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ABSTRACT

Research continues to point to collegiate athletes’ need to navigate their conflicting roles of academics and athletics simultaneously to be successful in their collegiate experience. Thus, in order to traverse these dual roles, collegiate athletes need to be both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to balance both academic and athletic responsibilities. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand collegiate athletes’ perceptions of motivation through a qualitative design based on Self Determination Theory (SDT). Ten collegiate athletes who competed at the NCAA Division I level in a variety of sports were interviewed for this study. Three meaningful themes emerged from the interview data: (a) Support, Resources, and Challenges for Collegiate Athletes, (b) Athletic Identity Influences Unbalanced Motivation, and (c) Importance of Culture, Coaches’ Leadership, and Environment. Specifically, collegiate athletes were satisfied with their institutions’ support, but most participants showed unbalanced motivation toward their dual roles within athletics and academics. Additionally, theoretical and practical implications for sport researchers, practitioners, and coaches are provided within this study.

Keywords: Athletic Identity; Collegiate Sport; Self-determination Theory; Time Demands

Collegiate athletes are considered a unique population as they are full-time college students who also compete in sports as representatives of their institutions and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). To maintain their eligibility as collegiate athletes, they must make numerous sacrifices and take on responsibilities such as maintaining a minimum grade point average (GPA) while also engaging in intensive athletic activities. This means collegiate athletes are required to excel both academically and athletically throughout their college careers. In order to navigate these demands and remain eligible, collegiate athletes face various pressures and stressors, including scheduling classes, sleep deprivation, financial strain, and the rigid expectations of their coaches (Cosh & Tully, 2015; Hwang & Choi, 2016). According to the NCAA (2020), collegiate athletes are limited to spending a maximum of 20 hours per week on athletic-related activities. However, previous research has indicated that Division I collegiate athletes actually dedicate around 40 hours per week to sport-related activities, which include training, recovery, film study, meetings, and competitions (Smith & Hardin, 2018).

Time Demands, Athletic Identity and Transitioning Out of Sport

Due to the time demand of their high-intensity physical activities, collegiate athletes spend most of their time with athletic-related people and places. In addition to their training and competitions, collegiate athletes engage in various athletic-related activities, such as meetings with coaches and athletic staff. Moreover, they mostly eat meals with their teammates to accommodate their unique schedule. Consequently, many collegiate athletes possess a strong athletic identity that has been established since they were young. Athletic identity or “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237), has been shown to help athletes achieve their goals (Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). According to Wylleman and Lavellee (2004), they discovered that athletic identity can become deeply ingrained and exert a significant influence on
the lives of athletes ranging from youth to those at the elite level, primarily due to the substantial commitment and time dedicated to athletics.

However, despite this tremendous investment, athletes still possess a small chance to continue their athletic careers after college, as making it to the professional ranks is extremely difficult (Simon et al., 1999; Smith et al., 2018, 2020). Since collegiate athletes have minimal opportunities to continue their careers after college, the majority of them face a transitioning process when opting out of sport. Previous research indicated that collegiate athletes frequently struggle with transitioning out of sport, especially those that have spent less time during their collegiate career concerned or focused on their academic role (Hart & Swenty, 2015; Kidd et al., Lally, 2007; Mathey & Smith, 2023; Stokowski et al., 2019; Smith & Hardin, 2018, 2020). To provide an effective and successful higher education environment for collegiate athletes, it is important to understand their motivations toward their dual roles in academics and athletics. Previous research has used Self Determination Theory (SDT) to understand collegiate athletes’ motivation and satisfaction, autonomy, competence, and relatedness to succeed both athletically and academically (Raabe et al., 2022; Readdy et al., 2014), but overall there are “a limited number of studies focused on SDT within the collegiate sport environment” (Raabe et al., 2022, p. 78).

Collegiate athletes and their experiences have long been a focus of sport scholarly research. In the current landscape of collegiate athletics where paramount changes have been adopted, allowing more voice and freedom to the athletes themselves (i.e., new NCAA transfer portal, Name, Image, & Likeness (NIL), and legal battles for representation and unionization), much of the current literature has focused on these fundamental changes, academic and athletic experiences of revenue-generating athletes, and issues of compensation and exploitation (Berg et al., 2023; Briggs et al., 2021; Cooper, 2016; Corr et al., 2023a, 2023b; Howe & Johnston-Guerrero, 2021; Reese, 2023; Stokowski et al., 2023). These studies and their work are vastly important as the landscape of collegiate athletics continues to adapt and change.

However, it has been noted in the literature that there is a lack of work that focuses on the non-revenue generating athletes that make up a majority of collegiate sport participants and sport teams, particularly related to their self-determination (Paule-Koba & Farr, 2021; Paule & Gibson, 2010; Smith & Hardin, 2018, 2020). Paule-Koba and Farr (2021) stated that the majority of all NCAA athletes compete in sports outside those labeled as revenue-generating (i.e., football, basketball, and in some cases, conferences and institutions, baseball, and softball). Thus, to understand if the mission and vision of the NCAA “to provide world class athletics and academic experiences for student-athletes that foster lifelong well-being” (NCAA, n.d.) is being met, it is imperative that college athletic researchers continue to study the athletes that make up the majority of the population, especially in relation to their self-determination in both roles, as on average, 98% of athletes will leave competitive sport behind after finishing their collegiate careers.

Additionally, Raabe and colleagues (2022) noted the lack of research work focused on exploring collegiate athletes’ perceptions of SDT across their academic experiences. Particularly, their study focused on the conditions supporting an athlete’s experiences with autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This study differs in that its purpose is to deeply explore and understand collegiate athletes’ perceptions of motivation related to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation regarding their dual athletic and academic responsibilities through SDT. What is unique to this study and echoes more recent research (Smith & Hardin, 2018, 2020) is that all the participants were non-revenue generating collegiate athletes. Furthermore, while previous research (Paule & Gilson, 2010; Paule-Koba & Farr, 2021) delved into the experiences of collegiate athletes in non-revenue-generating sports during or directly after their college careers, this study focuses on the motivation of athletes in both academics and athletics, supported by a robust theoretical framework on motivation.

**Current Landscape of Collegiate Athletics: Revenue and Non-Revenue Generating Athletes**

Although there is a wide array of issues and areas within the collegiate athletic landscape that are studied by scholars, one area of emphasis is the distinction between revenue and non-revenue generating athletes. Historically, revenue-generating or profit-athletes were thought to be exclusively Power-5 conference football and men’s basketball players; however, this has expanded in recent years due to the popularity and investment in women’s basketball and growth of the
College World Series for baseball and softball players (Kidd et al., 2018; NCAA, 2024; Southall et al., 2012). Several markers or key characteristics have been found to be associated with revenue-generating athletes in previous literature, with the largest being an emphasis on athletic role engulfment, which is when the athletic identity and role becomes the dominant and single focus causing an abandonment of academic and social roles (Adler & Adler, 1991).

Previous research has found that revenue-generating athletes receive a great deal of attention for their academic roles and successes (Foster & Huml, 2017), which can cause them to detach from their academic and social identities and result in an insular relationship within their athletic environments (i.e., spending all their time and relationships within their team and athletic settings; Briggs et al., 2021; Melendez, 2009; Southall & Weiler, 2014). Additionally, many of these revenue-generating athletes may participate in this athletic role engulfment due to the visibility and internal and external emphasis on their ability to move into professional sports after college (Beamon, 2012; Briggs et al., 2021; Kidd et al., 2018).

In comparison, previous research has found that non-revenue generating collegiate athletes are said to have distinct experiences (Marx et al., 2008; Paule & Gilson, 2010) and invest in their academic identities more often and sooner than their revenue generating athlete peers (Kimball, 2007; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Miller & Kerr, 2003). Particularly and historically, this distinction and focus on academics and a more complete holistic identity has been found in women’s collegiate athletics (Lee & Sten, 2017; Tekavc et al., 2015). However, scholars recently have begun to challenge the notion that non-revenue generating athletes do not possess a high athletic identity that affects their collegiate experience and transition out of their sport. For example, scholars have begun to reveal high athletic identity salience in women athletes (DeFreese et al., 2021; Oshiro et al., 2023; Smith & Hardin, 2018), non-revenue generating Division I athletes (Stokowski et al., 2019) and in Division II and III non-revenue generating athletes (Smith & Hardin, 2020). Thus, given the shift of the NCAA landscape due to structural and policy changes, as well as the work from recent scholars, non-revenue generating athletes and their motivational experiences within their academic and athletic domains needs to be studied and addressed.

Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) focuses on the degree to which an individual’s behavior is self-motivated and self-determined toward their psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Recently, scholars have used SDT as a guiding framework to assess an intervention model of resiliency based in these core concepts within a group of diverse, at-risk NCAA Division I college athletes, where significant differences were found between the control and intervention groups resulting in intervention group members having higher decision-making scores, lower levels of perceived stress, and increased resiliency (Chandler et al., 2020). In another recent study centering the three components of SDT, Shannon et al. (2020) assessed the relationship between mindfulness, well-being, and stress in 240 student-athletes, and found that mindfulness practices may improve well-being and reduce stress, increasing the athlete’s psychological need for autonomy. Readdy et al. (2014) found in their study of 85 collegiate football players that extrinsic rewards and motivation did not enhance their athletic motivation, but also were not detrimental, thus creating a “middle ground” (p. 168). Brouwer et al. (2022) found in their focus group of 62 college athletes that they were motivated to achieve academically due to external factors such as perceptions of their grades and intellectual ability, ability to attend graduate school, or propel future employment. Lastly, Raabe et al. (2022) found in their mixed method study of NCAA Division I, II, and III athletes that external factors such as coaches, teammates, professors, and classmates influenced participants’ levels of autonomy, relatedness, and competence in academics and athletics.

For this study, in comparison to previous work centering SDT, we focused more on the continuum and spectrum of the three levels of motivation as described by SDT: intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation. Whether a person is self-determined or not is decided based on the three psychological needs in this theory. For instance, a more autonomous person can be considered self-determined and intrinsically motivated. On the other hand, a less autonomous person may be considered as either extrinsically motivated or amotivated. While intrinsic motivation refers to doing an activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself, extrinsic motivation is a construct that
Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation can be separated into four levels based on how the motivation is controlled by external factors: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation. External regulation is the most extrinsically motivated level and adopts a behavior to obtain a reward or to avoid punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In general, external regulation can be described as the contrast of intrinsic motivation. Introjected regulation is an internal pressure either to pursue self-worth or to avoid guilt and shame (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) described introjected regulation as acting to avoid guilt or anxiety. Identified regulation explains internalized behaviors that are identified as personally meaningful (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is a more self-regulated form of extrinsic motivation than the above two regulations. Lastly, integrated regulation is behaviors that are congruent with one’s values and needs, but still have some external aspect (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation. Amotivation can be simply defined as a lack of motivation. In this case, people cannot see a connection between their actions and the potential outcome (Alderman, 2008). Ryan and Deci (2000) described that when a person is amotivated, a person acts without intent or does not act at all.

Using extrinsic rewards to stimulate students’ motivation has attracted researchers’ curiosity (Kingston et al., 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Kingston et al. (2006) found that extrinsic rewards manifest extrinsic motivation toward accomplishments; however, extrinsic rewards weaken collegiate athletes’ intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, other researchers found that extrinsic rewards are desirable and essential to increase intrinsic motivation (Stipek, 1996; Readdy et al., 2014). For instance, Readdy et al. (2014) explored football collegiate athletes’ athletic motivation using SDT perspectives and an extrinsic rewards program. The study indicated that extrinsic rewards could decrease amotivation and extrinsic regulation and increase intrinsic motivation (Readdy et al., 2014). Pedescaleaux (2010) used SDT to investigate non-cognitive motivational factors for academic achievement in terms of academic motivation for collegiate athletes and found the need for academic and social support programs to motivate collegiate athletes for positive academic achievements (Pedescaleaux, 2010). Therefore, understanding collegiate athletes’ motivation is critical in developing a successful career during and after college.

Intrinsic Motivation

Initially, intrinsic motivation has been considered by previous research as more positive while extrinsic motivation is seen as more negative. In general, if people are intrinsically motivated, they are more likely to have better performances and less performance-related anxiety than extrinsically motivated people (Vallerand, 1997; Vallerand & Losier, 1999; Weiss & Ferrer Caja, 2002). However, Ryan and Deci (2000) described SDT as a continuum, which means that humans’ motivation could be shifted from amotivation to extrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation based on factors or rewards. Given the purpose of this study to explore and understand collegiate athletes’ perceptions of motivation regarding their dual athletic and academic responsibilities and experiences, SDT matches the guiding framework.

Method

This study used a descriptive qualitative method to better understand collegiate athletes’ experiences and thoughts related to their academic and athletic motivation, specifically related to extrinsic, intrinsic, and amotivation. Descriptive qualitative approaches are commonly used to explore an unknown or under-researched phenomenon (Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). Since this study focused on identifying collegiate athletes’ in-depth motivational thoughts and perceptions of their athletic and academic roles, a descriptive qualitative approach was used to deeply explore collegiate athletes’ inherent thoughts in terms of this study’s purpose.
Sampling

Ten collegiate athletes currently competing at the NCAA Division I level were recruited for this study. The researchers obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to data collection. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants for this study. The researchers first searched social media accounts of collegiate athletes. Then, the researchers sent direct messages regarding an invitation and willingness to participate in this study. Collegiate athletes who initiated their interest to participate in the study were communicated with as potential participants and then scheduled for an interview. Multiple collegiate athletes expressed their interest in the study, but 10 fully enrolled in the study and completed an interview. This study uniquely recruited 10 non-revenue-generating collegiate athletes to investigate their experiences and how they balance their motivation between dual roles. This study also included a diverse group of collegiate athletes from various sports, ensuring a balanced representation of gender and academic class demographics.

Table 1
Demographic information of the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Academic Class</th>
<th>Interview Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Water Polo</td>
<td>Red Shirt Junior</td>
<td>43 mins 30 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Rowing</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>40 mins 01 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>28 mins 21 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>22 mins 55 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Red Shirt Junior</td>
<td>24 mins 04 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>40 mins 58 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Golf</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>31 mins 57 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>47 mins 26 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Track &amp; Field</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>27 mins 04 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Volleyball</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>37 mins 10 secs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ave. / Total</td>
<td>M:6 / F:4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedure

An interview protocol was established to collect high-quality data with a small group of collegiate athletes, provide a consistent starting point for the interviews, and allow researchers to orchestrate follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). A semi-structured format was selected for the interviews due to its ability to help participants raise salient topics and guide the interview based on their expertise of the topic. The interview protocol included demographic questions and core questions regarding collegiate athletes’ motivations based on SDT.

Data Analysis

The researchers recorded and transcribed all the interviews through a third-party company. The transcribed data were coded with three rounds of coding processes including open, in-vivo, and axial coding to find meaningful themes from the data. Open and in-vivo coding were used to create labels and developing categories based on meaning and dimensions from the direct words and phrases of participants (Saldaña, 2021). Axial coding provided the ability to dive into the open coded data more deeply searching for meaning, characteristics, and attribute dimensions (Saldaña, 2021). Next, these codes were condensed down to begin searching for themes, then these themes were reviewed in relation to the codes extracted. Finally, these themes were defined and named to tell the overall story.
Findings and Discussion

Through the data analysis process, three meaningful themes emerged and were identified: (a) Support, Resources, and Challenges for Collegiate Athletes, (b) Athletic Identity Influences Unbalanced Motivation, and (c) Importance of Culture, Coaches' Leadership, and Environment. In the first theme, the participants talked about academic support and available resources afforded to them to assist with their academic demands. Also, this theme discussed various challenges conducting their dual roles of academics and athletics simultaneously. The second theme explained participants’ motivational perspectives toward their academic and athletic roles and how athletic identity impacted motivation. For the final theme, many participants discussed that team culture, coaches’ leadership, and environment are crucial factors toward their motivation.

Support, Resources, and Challenges for Collegiate Athletes

Most of the participants expressed that they were satisfied with the academic support provided by their institutions. NCAA Division I institutions provide pertinent support for their collegiate athletes both academically and athletically, more specifically, athletic academic centers to help collegiate athletes’ academic performance (Stokowski, 2017; Wolverton, 2008). Also, most Division I institutions employ support staff to enhance collegiate athletes’ athletic performance including athletic trainers, strength and conditioning coaches, and consultants. Participants in this study pointed to the support provided by academic advisors and the physical environments supplied by their institutions for collegiate athletes. This is illustrated by Eva, a golfer, when discussing her support staff: “She helps me with classes and she’s separate from my Athletic Advisor, I think you could say, in a sense of like her focus is to help me focus on my classes.” Kevin, a swimmer, also explained the culture in his athletic academic center stating: “We have pretty much anything that a student athlete could need. We have tutors that are specific to student athletes. We have mentoring sessions, just very well equipped.” Fred, a soccer player, described not only the resources and assistance he received as a student athlete, but also how the building and environment was set up for his benefit. He explicitly discussed environmental resources and how they positively impacted his motivation for academics:

The study hall has a bunch of tables. Very nice, very modern looking. Very clean which I think helps a lot for doing your homework, at least for me. When everything around me is very organized I feel motivated to do my work. They’ll pretty much help you with anything you need help on. If you need someone to talk to or if you need help scheduling your classes. If you need help with anything, that’s what they’re there for, which is super, super helpful.

Despite these resources, maintaining these dual roles successfully requires tremendous effort and time from collegiate athletes. This can be worsened when they are playing in season because it requires a greater time commitment to athletics (Miller & Kerr, 2003). The intense time demand and additional stressors can cause challenges to perform academically as explained by Eva: “There was a lot of competition. And so, I had to spend a lot of time practicing keeping up with my playing competitors.” Additionally, collegiate athletes may feel an increased sense of academic pressure during their first year because of higher levels of academic rigor and their new environment (Gaston-Gayles & Baker, 2015). Brandon, a soccer player, explained the challenges of the athletic role, particularly stressing how travel for sport and practice can cause strains on time for academics: “College is a little bit harder, but that’s because I’m traveling more. And so, I have less time to study and more time that I have to dedicate to practice.” Eva also talked about her perspective living as a collegiate athlete, but mainly focused on her experiences regarding challenges and difficulties when traveling:

Whenever we’re in the hotel, we’re all studying. Yeah. Because we’re missing a lot of class, and so a lot of us are, most of us are going over the lecture notes that we were missing in that class day. Yeah. We usually either studying or playing golf. That’s what it is.

Under the NCAA governing body and each institution’s policies, collegiate athletes perform and spend tremendous effort representing and bringing attention to their institutions. Thus, the NCAA
and institutions are responsible for maintaining collegiate athletes’ persistence toward academic success and mental health. The NCAA acknowledges that the true value of college extends beyond athletic achievement, encompassing academic success. As such, the NCAA offers a range of opportunities for student-athletes to excel not only in their respective sports but also in their educational pursuits. This support includes the establishment of academic standards, monitoring progress toward degrees, provision of academic advising, and the allocation of scholarships (NCAA, 2021).

**Athletic Identity Influences Unbalanced Motivation**

More than 70% of this study’s participants showed extrinsic motivation for attending school rather than intrinsic motivation. Upon entering college, even though participants did not initially select their interested major due to time constraints imposed by their athletic commitments, academic pressures, or lack of clarity regarding their long-term career goals, they became intrinsically motivated toward those majors as time passed by. Although many collegiate athletes are supported by their institutions through various student success programs, centers, and advisors, many support services focus on maintaining athletes’ academic eligibility rather than investing in their long-term academic growth and development (Knight Foundation Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, 2010; Navarro, 2014). Additionally, the athletes themselves may be focused on academics as a means to an end for their sporting endeavors (extrinsic motivation). This can be seen through Fred’s comment: “Academics it’s not, I care about soccer a lot more than I care about academics. But I do care about academics, just because it’s just something in life that like all things has to be done.” Eva echoed this sentiment when she stated:

For me it’s like a backup. It’s a good steady, where it’s like a set way in order to prepare yourself for the future. I attend school because of the sport. So, I chose the school that I wanted to go to because I really liked the coach. I really liked the team and it was the scholarship that practically pulled me in. Like I enjoy learning and so that’s why I enjoy going to classes, but for the major reason that I go to school is so that I can be eligible to play my sport.

Given the centrality of their athletic experience and athletic identity, it is no surprise these participants had more intrinsic than extrinsic motivation skewed toward athletics. This can be seen in the quotes below demonstrating this strong athletic identity that has been found in previous research (Beamon, 2012; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Smith & Hardin, 2018, 2020). However, what is unique to this study and echoes more recent research (Smith & Hardin, 2018, 2020) is that all the participants were non-revenue generating collegiate athletes. Despite this distinction, they still cited high intrinsic motivation toward athletics, commitment to their sport, training, and sports’ influence on their personal identity, which until more recently were characteristics of revenue-generating collegiate athletes (Beamon, 2012; Kidd et al., 2018). For example, Brandon expressed that his high athletic identity and commitment to sport caused a lack of planning for the future: “Well, I don’t necessarily have a plan B at the moment, a lack of plan B.” Similarly, Carl discussed soccer’s presence in his life and future career plans:

The rest of my life I want to be involved in soccer in some way or another whether it’s coaching or some kind of front office job after my playing period hopefully. But yeah, definitely. There’s no other option on the table. I want to keep playing soccer.

Having a strong athletic identity may have an impact on athletes both positively (Brewer et al., 1993; Phoenix et al., 2005) and negatively (Kidd et al., 2018; Lavallee, 2005; Lally, 2007; Stoltenburg et al., 2011; Smith & Hardin, 2018, 2020; Stokowski et al., 2019). Previous research has found that collegiate athletes with a strong athletic identity may battle poor academic performances and struggle with their athletic eligibility (Lally & Kerr, 2005; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). As seen by the quotes above and the following one by Daniel (a soccer player), participants did not specifically mention the importance of academic performance, but they did emphasize the importance of sport in their life:

When I’m happiest, it’s when soccer’s going very well. The same with the opposite. When I’m most sad, it’s when soccer’s not going well at the time. But even away from just playing and stuff, soccer having the end goal in mind for so long has helped me stay on track in life. Soccer’s been the one thing that has kept me from taking that step in that direction because it’s always
been like soccer’s always in the back of my mind. So, it’s definitely pushed me as a person just as much as anything else. From the interviews, participants demonstrated that they were more extrinsically motivated regarding their academic responsibilities, reiterating the work of Brouwer and colleagues (2022). However, this motivation shifted to more intrinsic motivation as time passed by, similar to findings from Ryan and Deci (2000). This is reflected by Daniel stating: “[School is] a lot more fun than I thought it would be.” Jane, a volleyball player, reflected this evolutionary process of academics transforming from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation, stating: “I’m more interested because when I started, I was like, ‘This is not that fun.’ And then right now I’m like, ‘Oh, now I’m looking forward to my future classes.’” Another participant, Carl, also expressed his increased interest toward academics: “I think it’s more interesting. To be honest, I’m getting more in-depth about finance and everything. It’s definitely getting more interesting as it goes. It doesn’t lose its interest.”

Again, this theme particularly lends itself to a more complex understanding and finding related to athletic identity, academic motivation, and athletic motivation as participants discussed a move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation once they found a major and coursework that matched their interest. This also is a novel finding in the literature, as previous work exploring collegiate athletes’ experiences have found that athletes, especially in Division I revenue-generating sports, quickly move away from academics and focus purely on their athletic achievement due to the siloed nature and culture within their teams and institutions (Hardin & Pate, 2013; Kidd et al., 2018). Thus, it is a new finding that non-revenue collegiate athletes, particularly in this study, may move from extrinsic to intrinsic academic motivation based on discovering their major, future career goals, and passions.

Importance of Culture, Coaches’ Leadership, and Environment

Compared to their non-athlete peers, collegiate athletes can be affected by various sport-related factors since they spend a larger part of their time with their team, coaches, and athletic-related people. This situation may be more significant when they are playing in season due to the higher requirements and intensity of training, competitions, and travel. Thereby, researchers have sought to find what external factors could impact collegiate athletes’ roles and lives. For instance, previous research has indicated that the relationship between coaches and collegiate athletes can have a considerable impact on academics (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). In addition, Comeaux et al. (2011) pointed out the critical roles of coaches, academic advisors, and counselors to create positive learning environments for transitioning first-year collegiate athletes.

More than 80% of the participants echoed the importance of a coach’s role and the environment for academics, as seen by this quote from Kevin: “I think the biggest thing is just coach caring about our academics and caring about how well we do. We want to do good for him along with ourselves.” Fred emphasized the importance their coach and team played in facilitating a focus on academics:

I did not care that much about school. A couple of the teammates that I was living with were older and so they had some impacts on me. They didn’t really care about school, which made me care less, which is obviously not good. There’s just a much better culture within the team and with the coaches. Everyone strives to do really well inside the classroom along with on the field. I’ve started caring about school and my academics.

Kevin, also pointed out how coaching leadership and team cultures are crucial for collegiate athletes’ academic performance and success:

I don’t know how the other coaches operate, but the way that my team works, it’s not just the coaches and the academic advisors that put pressure. I think that everyone wants you to succeed academically, so the support... Our coach was good at doing his best to support us academically, and then our academic advisors were always really good at their jobs. So, I think that we have enough resources and enough manpower to have everyone be eligible, at least stay eligible at the bare minimum.

Jane also described the culture of her athletic team and how her coaching staff prioritized academics: Academically, we’re held to a higher standard than a lot of other schools. I know our team is held to a higher standard academically and just performance-wise in general. Our coaches put a very big emphasis on academics. Again, I didn’t really experience this because I was doing well, but there were times when my teammates would not be doing well. Instead of practice,
you would have them go to study hall to make sure that they got their grades up. I think that
our coaching staff really wants our team to do well in school.
As described by the participants, coaches had crucial roles in motivating collegiate athletes,
fostering both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Echoing the work of Raabe and colleagues (2022),
participants in this study indicated the importance and impact of coaches and their team on the levels
of their motivation, particularly academic motivation. For instance, coaches can facilitate access to
academic support services, or they may help their collegiate athletes set academic goals while
developing time management skills. Even though many collegiate athletes dreamed of being
professional players after college, they have a very minimal chance to achieve their dreams. Thus,
team culture, coaching leadership, and the environment around collegiate athletes have a
considerable role in this preparation in and outside of their collegiate career.
In addition to academic support and transition, team culture plays an important role when
collegiate athletes are coping with difficulties and challenges. As described earlier, collegiate
athletes endure many restrictions and responsibilities to succeed in their dual roles. Cutler and
Dwyer (2020) stated that most athletes would define the culture of their team as family. Thus, team
culture plays a pivotal role in collegiate athletes’ coping and mental wellness. Motivation stems
from individual passion and contentment, and it can significantly affect one’s mental well-being.
Past studies have shown that the extent of support for these psychological needs plays a crucial role
in shaping positive behaviors that benefit both physical and mental health (Ryan et al., 2008). Also,
coaches’ leadership can be one of the most influential elements in creating a positive team culture.

Implications and Future Research

Findings from this study revealed that many participants had a specific focus and intrinsic
motivation for athletics rather than academics, coupled with a strong athletic identity. On the other
hand, some participants showed they were extrinsically motivated toward their academic role. A
novel finding of this work is that extrinsic motivation is transferable to intrinsic motivation once
collegiate athletes grasp interest in their academic classes and major. Since collegiate athletes have
minimal possibilities to continue their playing careers after college, it is highly recommended that
they be prepared for the next chapter of their lives. One of the ways to prepare for this is to prioritize
academics during college, particularly within their coursework and future career interest. This study
found that even though participants had unbalanced motivations (i.e., higher athletic motivation than
academic motivation), that motivation can be increased by team cultures, coaches’ leadership, and
environmental factors. While previous studies (Brouwer et al., 2022; Paule & Gilson, 2010; Paule-
Koba & Farr, 2021; Raabe et al., 2022) concentrated on the advantages experienced and
psychological perspectives of collegiate athletes, with a particular emphasis on non-revenue
athletes, this study explored and focused on the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation of collegiate
athletes in both academic and athletic realms, drawing upon a strong theoretical background using
SDT. In addition, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping
Division I non-revenue generating collegiate athletes’ experiences and motivations regarding their
academic and athletic roles.
Notably, this study demonstrates NCAA Division I collegiate athletes may experience more
conflicts compared with athletes in the two other NCAA divisions, setting two distinct patterns of
motivation in their dual roles of academics and athletics. Consequently, support staff should
consider ways in which they can empower and support this exploration earlier in collegiate athletes’
academic journeys. Most of the data for this study was collected before the pandemic was fully over.
It would be a valuable endeavor for future research to explore the experiences and motivation of
collegiate athletes post-pandemic and compare them with those of the pandemic era.
Future research should continue to explore the dimensions of motivation with collegiate athletes
at all levels, and additionally, it could compare the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of NCAA
athletes regarding gender, sport, and their future career plans inside and outside sport. Lastly,
continued research should be devoted to understanding these important factors in the life of
collegiate athletes, as findings like the ones in this study can assist academic and athletic personnel,
including coaches, to better support and care for their athletes.
References


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